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ABSTRACT

A study of a junior-level grammar class for preservice teachers was conducted by an observer at Miami University of Ohio to determine the effectiveness of a Socratic teaching style that allowed the teacher to do most of the talking. Students in the class also participated in the observation; they were interviewed regularly by the graduate student. Findings indicated that: (1) students were sometimes uncomfortable in the class--they felt pressured and were afraid to participate because they did not want the teacher to put them on the spot; (2) they did not understand the significance of a transition from one text to another, which illustrates how important it is that students know where they are going in a course and why; and (3) students found themselves reflecting about how they would teach a similar course themselves when they became teachers. Students were concerned about how they could best present the material; how they could best use their texts; how they could best prepare students for proficiency exams. Those students who chose to participate in the regular interviews as student-observers became more than just students of the material; they became students of pedagogy. The teacher of the course also found himself changing, adjusting his course to address student critiques passed on to him by the observer. (TB)

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From Fear of Parsing to Teaching to Parse: A Study of Transformations in a Course on Grammar

Background and Method

In the introduction to Doing Grammar, Max Morenberg states, "Grammar! I doubt whether any school subject is so universally dreaded and loathed" (vii). Based on my own emotional response and on the data I gathered sitting in Max's junior-level grammar class (required for English Education majors) for a semester and observing, I'd say that his comment is accurate. When we began the semester, I asked students to tell me why they were taking the course. Thirty-three of the 37 said the primary reason was that they had to. Many also spoke of their fear:

> I'm terrified. . . . I remember painfully "getting" a grammar lesson.
>
> My goal is to finally face my fear of grammar and to overcome the fear. I hate grammar.
>
> This class is an obstacle which must be overcome.

I understood those feelings. I came into this study with my own prejudices about grammar, having bypassed similar courses as an undergraduate and graduate student. My last class in grammar was in the eighth grade, and my memories were not pleasant. I remember lots of rote exercises—exercises which seemed purposeless and boring. But, like the students in the class, I felt like finally facing the grammar demons that haunted me. Sitting in Max's class and observing gave me the opportunity to face my fear and to understand the fear of others.

Max had a history of encountering students' fears and prejudices (as well as the knowledge that English teachers, to a large extent, don't highly value grammar). For the past few years, he had been wondering whether or not his teaching methods contributed to those fears. He was concerned that he was neither communicating the value of learning the system of our language to his students nor alleviating their fears.

My study was a result of those concerns. Max approached me with one idea

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in mind—to tell him what happened in his classroom. To answer this question, I knew I'd have observe on a daily basis. But to understand the effects of his teaching, we also decided that I needed to become a student and learn the material. I realized that taking the class and observing would be problematic: sometimes, because I'd become focused on the material of the class, I'd miss what was happening in the classroom. To compensate, I decided to recruit student-observers, believing that they would be looking when I was not and our varied perspectives would give Max better feedback.

During the first class session, Max and I explained to the class who I was and what I was doing. We received written permission from the students to audio-tape a few of the class sessions. I also asked for student volunteers to work with me as student-observers. Twelve volunteered; eight stuck with it. The nine of us met every two weeks and talked. I recorded these sessions as well. Our intentions were to describe what we saw in the classroom; to discuss how Max's teaching methods affected us; to discuss how we thought the material we learned would impact on us as teachers; and to recommend changes to Max that we thought would help students better learn the material.

By the end of the semester, we had collected a lot of data. We took "field notes" in class and I audio-taped eight class sessions. We met every other week to discuss what we saw and how the class affected us. I asked pairs of the undergraduates to take responsibility for summing up two-week blocks of time and writing a report through me to Max about what they saw, felt, and recommended. I took the first two-week block to model an example of such a summary for the students. Max received all our reports at the semester's end.

My purpose here is to provide a snapshot of what we saw, trying to describe the transformations that occurred in me, the students, and in Max. I've limited myself to my field notes and the transcripts of the class sessions and meetings with my co-researchers. My approach to analyzing this data is based on strategies I've adapted from reading Stubb's Discourse Analysis. I've transcribed many of the class tapes and have studied "particular transcripts" in detail, as Stubbs recommends.

Max's Teaching Methods

Max is a classic example of the teacher who creates a "constant, ritualized,

stylized environment" (Stubbs 63). He runs the class from the helm. Stubbs claims that in such a stylized environment, a teacher typically speaks 70% of the time. In the transcriptions I examined, Max speaks nearly 67% of the time and utters nearly 85% of the words spoken in class. He works very hard to explain, summarize, correct, edit, define, and evaluate what is said. He also knows what is relevant to the class, and if the discussion wanders too far, he uses every technique he can to bring it back on line. Max's method of handling the exchanges is typical in classroom situations where turn-taking is "not open for negotiation" (Mehan 126).

For Max, the classroom is a place to impart knowledge and a place to perform (Interview). Often performing is the means by which knowledge is imparted. Sometimes it merely opens a channel that seemed closed. As I read and reread the transcriptions, I examined both of these aspects of his pedagogy. The first—to impart knowledge—is clearly his goal. In a paper he presented at a linguistics conference in Amsterdam ("Learn to Parse"), he explained his "main goal . . . [is] to show students that grammar has system, that it isn't merely a list of unrelated 'rules' to memorize so that [they] can fill in diagrams and catch all the errors on students' papers." He wants his "students to understand how language works" (3). To do so, he explained, "I run these grammar sessions by a Socratic method, putting sentences from the textbook on the board and having individual students answer questions about the structures and functions of the constituents. Usually I keep talking to one student until he or she completes a sentence, identifying all its constituents" (4).

Followers of the Socratic pedagogy have a place to which they want to bring students—in this case the place is a parsed sentence with all constituents labeled. Max knows the answers; he "keep[s]" talking to the students until they get them. Socratic teachers (if they're effective) must be extremely alert to what is being said to guide the students to their journey's completion. To this extent, then, such teachers often use much metacommunicative language to monitor the "working of the communication channels, clarif[y] and reformula[te] the language used" (Stubbs 53). They also use language in "radically asymmetrical" ways (53)—a result of knowing in advance what the students must learn, a result of being the guide, the one responsible for the journey.

Max used such metacommunicative language in the opening of nearly every class and relied on it as he conducted every parsing session. For example, on one

occasion, in the middle of the semester, the point he wanted to make was that "recognizing infinitives (and their function), recognizing noun clauses of various kinds, and what we're getting into now—recognizing gerunds"(Tape recording 9 Mar 93) was a serious topic, essential to the project of "doing grammar." He was concerned that this particular topic was more difficult than usual, so he recommended that the students "get together with friends . . . and kinda talk this stuff through; work it out together" because the quiz was "not easy" (Tape).

Talking with him later, I discovered that his worry accounted for the unusually long opening segment of teacher-talk. To focus his remarks, he used two sentences from the section on gerunds in Chapter 6 of *Doing Grammar* to create a base of knowledge. During this entire stretch of time (nearly sixteen minutes), no one else said a word—not one. He talked; they listened. He used questions (a total of 36 in that opening sequence) along the way to check to see if we were with him. These questions—"Okay?" "Right?" and "With me?"—served the functions of maintaining contact in the Hymesian sense (Stubbs, 46) as well as checking or confirming understanding (Stubbs 51; Atkinson 108).

An example of such a usage occurred just before the transcript begins. Max was clarifying the difference between two kinds of gerund phrases.

> They don't come from the same place. They **look** the same, but you know that they're different. I mean if you really think it through, but you have to think it through, you have to give all your tests to it, to have to check to see what it is, OK? This is just a plain ol' vanilla gerund phrase, OK? This is a hot fudge sundae. That is, this is a gerund with genitive, OK?

Max was explaining, imparting knowledge, some of which he expected the students to be familiar with from the reading assignments in his textbook (note his reference to "you *know* [my emphasis] that they're different"). He looked for ways to make clear the knowledge he considered necessary for the students. His example of the "plain ol' vanilla" versus a "hot fudge sundae" was just one of the ways he re-presented information over and over. His questions—"OK?"—were his means of asking the students "Are you following?"; "Are you staying with me?" But, he made little or no room during these explanations for the students to intervene. His language made that evident. There was no selecting going on (as there is for turn-taking). He kept the privilege of speaking for himself.

Effects on the Students

One might ask what the effect is of such a method? This was one of the questions Max wanted answered. Coming to class nearly every session and watching how he ran it convinced me that he knew where he wanted students to end up and had developed methods for guiding students towards that place. From my observations and discussions, I could see that most students seemed to adapt quickly, and most seemed capable of mastering the essential knowledge the teacher imparted. The average quiz score for the class was in the mid-80s. But, there were tensions evident, especially when the direction Max thought was essential was not the direction that facilitated complete answers to questions students posed. This issue was reflected in the many interchanges between various students and Max. It also surfaced during my interviews with the students, often framed as an issue of "pacing."

At times, I even felt uncomfortable, ill-at-ease, and, in some cases, downright threatened in class myself—especially when I came to class without having had the time to work the exercises assigned for homework (I was teaching two courses and taking two others in addition to this project). I also learned that the students in my group (and others as well) expressed the same anxiety. Here are some of their comments:

> I don't really like being put on the spot like that. I'm able to parse the sentence on paper, but when he singled me out, I drew a blank and felt very inadequate.
>
> I felt a bit scared to asked questions for fear of being put on the spot.
>
> Most obvious to me was that when someone would ask a question, he sticks with that person. . . . He never lets him/her off the hook. Even though it might be good for the student, it has to be embarrassing.

Had the class continued uninterrupted, most of the students would have emerged with a sound, basic understanding of the system of our language. But, the tension would have been there, and students would have lost an opportunity to see something important modeled: teachers who listen to their students, who conduct some form of teacher research, can actually improve the classroom environment.

they can make learning more interactive, more fun, more successful. This was also an important goal for both me and for Max. We both recognized that the teacher is a role model for the students (especially for these students).

For this reason, I chose to summarize the responses by me and the undergraduate very early. I wrote a brief, seven-page summary focusing on his teaching methods relating to parsing and gave it to him at the three-week mark. I hoped that if I presented our concerns about how he handled parsing in class, along with other issues, he'd adjust his strategy. It worked. He did. The results were a much more relaxed environment. The student-observers noticed the differences and commented on them during our next meeting:

> I noticed on Tuesday that there were a lot of changes made in the class. Did anyone else notice them? (Marianne)
>
> I noticed a big difference. . . . He was moving around the room more. (Laura)
>
> I thought the group work [a suggestion I had made] was great! The second hour flew by. It was helpful to work through the problems with other students. (Gerry)

Despite the positive feedback, I limited my input to him about his teaching methods and only spoke up when I felt it absolutely necessary.

There were times when it was necessary. Late in the semester, during one of our meetings, the student-observers pointed out problems they were having trying to understand why Max was using Loban's *Language Development: Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade*. Marianne (one of the two students responsible for this particular two week stretch), began the session by focusing on this issue:

> Basically the thing I'm interested in is the transition from the grammar book to the Loban book and also thinking about grammar more objectively and also about how he wrapped up the grammar book. . . . My observation of the first day was that he kinda got frustrated by our response on the first day, and I'm wondering: why do you think that happened? and if you were in his place what would you do differently?

She was concerned with the pedagogical move Max made as he shifted from one text to another. She noted that he "was frustrated" by the students' apparent lack of response. In addition, she wanted to open up a discussion about teaching: "if you were in his place, what would you do differently?" The other students, however,

couldn't get past their own take on the class. They were confused.

> I really didn't feel as if there was any transition at all. I felt as if well we're done with this, now let's start with this. (Douglass)

> You know, I don't understand what we're supposed to look for in this book. You know, you read it and it's a bunch of statistics. . . . I don't feel like he explained it to us. (Mike)

Marianne responded to this confusion appropriately and, like any good qualitative researcher, she tried to get her fellow students to expand and elaborate. She asked them, "So you're kinda confused about what the rest of the course will be?" Gerry's response was typical: "I totally . . . missed that whole idea there."

As I listened, I realized the other students, rooted in the problems they had understanding the material, had "missed the whole idea." They were unable to proceed to thinking about teaching. To me, this was a clear example of the teacher not giving the students enough background material and not making the assignment clear. After listening to these comments by the student-observers, I felt obligated to talk to Max. I met with him shortly after my meeting with the student-observers and told him how confused the students were about Loban. He chose to begin the next class discussing that very issue. After the class in which Max discussed what he expected them to know, several of the students told me that they finally understood why they had purchased Loban's book and how they should view it. To me, this illustrates how much students want to know where they're going and why what they're learning is important.

Students as Prospective Teachers

In the last example, only one student was capable of moving beyond her experience as a student to project how she would teach. This was unusual (which is why I responded as I did). Most of they time, the student-observers told me they felt obligated to be more attentive, and that being more attentive resulted in their thinking about not only the material, but also about what they would do with the material when they taught a class on grammar—something all of them but one would be doing in the near future. Grammar became more than just something to learn because they had to pass the course. It became the locus for issues about

pedagogy. What follows is a brief interchange highlighting such an issue: the problems one might encounter when teaching pre-articles and auxillary verbs.

> Marianne: I think you could teach it the way Max has it, but when you get to future tense, make it clear that . . . I think kids are smart enough to say that whenever I see "shall" or "will" or things like that, that they're all associated with future. If you make it clear and acknowledge the principles, I think they can grasp it.
>
> David: I think what you're showing and when this modal is used whatever, it's also known as future tense.
>
> Gerry: I think it might be kind of difficult . . . I think that the way the book would present it would be—"some" would be a noun or a pronoun or whatever they call it then and "flowers" would be a prepositional phrase. I think the biggest thing is probably to address that. I mean if you have these tests . . . I know a pre-article is going to be on there, to me it makes a lot more sense because that's how you say it so that's how it should be, but how would you do that in the classroom setting? I don't know how you're going to explain it. There's two different ways.

The discussion is provocative, addressing how to teach grammar out of different—even conflicting—texts, trying to project what their future charges would be capable of understanding (based on their student-teaching experience). It then moves from provocative to political.

> Laura: What about the proficiency exam?
>
> Gerry: Well how would you teach it?
>
> Laura: Yeh, how would you teach it?

The discussion began trying to resolve ambiguity in classifying the constituents of a sentence. Nothing unusual here; it is what parsing is all about. Yet the vary act of classifying became "tough," became politicized, when the issue was enlarged to take in the context of the state-administered tests, or at least their conception of the standardized tests. To their credit, the student-observers felt obligated to consider how they would address the issue and solve the problem.

> Gerry: . . . They're going to have to know the way you're going to test them, they're going to have to know the way they get tested by the state.
>
> Maura: I think you need to get a copy of the proficiency exam early and do, you know, what I'd call a reconnaissance, so you know what they will get tested on, so you can adjust your methods appropriately.
>
> Douglass: Just real quick. . . . I was reading a book for another class, and in it the author [said] he really doesn't teach grammar at all, but . . . the week or two weeks before the proficiency exam he runs over everything that they need to know on the exam, and then they take the exam and he goes on.

What I found most interesting about the interchange that day is that the students were not simply students trying to learn the system according to Morenberg. They were becoming prospective teachers, worried about the dynamics of their classroom and the possible conflicts between what they were learning and how it meshed with what they would be expected to teach to their students. They were forced to consider conflicting needs: the need to present information in the best possible way, the need to use the texts issued to their students, and the need to prepare students for state proficiency tests. They resolved their problems—intelligently and pragmatically.

One reason I wanted students to participate in the study was to see if such involvement would increase their interest in issues of pedagogy—how they experienced the material and how they planned to teach it. From the very first day in class when I introduced myself, defined my goals, and asked for volunteers, I mentioned that one of the benefits of working with me on the study would be to learn more about teaching in general and about teaching grammar in particular.

The eight students who stuck it out as observers did become more reflective both as teachers and as learners. Elevating these students to observer status changed their role in the class. They were more than just students of the material. They were also evaluators who were looking at the classroom in action and trying to figure out if what was going on was productive. And they were prospective teachers, trying to visualize how they could take what they learned about grammar and about teaching and apply it in the future when they taught.

Conclusion

As I think about this study, I think about transformations. The first transformation occurred in me and in the students working with me. We overcame our fear of grammar as we became students of the language we profess to teach. We learned to parse, and we began to see how language works in student writing and in literature. Knowing how to parse, knowing what constitutes constituency, will give us the kind of detailed knowledge to direct or, in some cases, redirect students to guide them to write more interesting papers. Knowing will give us power and control over our own writing. Knowing will also make us more professional teachers of language.

The second transformation occurred not only as a result of what we learned but also as a result of the method in which we learned. The study highlighted the positive benefits of actively involving students in teacher research, particularly students who have an investment in learning about teaching. Students who began the semester anxious about the material became teachers anxiously awaiting the opportunity to use that material. One of the most satisfying components of this study was seeing students expand their focus from thinking about the course material to considering how the way they were being taught affected their ability to learn, and, even more importantly, to how they could best teach the material they were learning.

This transformation is evident in the comments the students made to me on the last day of class. I asked them to talk about their feelings toward grammar, to discuss what they learned, and to describe how they would use it. Nearly all felt better prepared; there were no longer comments reflecting fear and loathing. One of the student-observers said it best: "In summary, we feel like we are ready to teach." Here are a few of the other students' comments:

> I will definitely use what I have learned in this class. The information has made my job as a teacher easier.
>
> I'm positive I will use what I've learned in this course when I teach . . . what I've learned in English 302 will help me a great deal.
>
> Dr. Morenberg has a good system of approaching grammar . . . that makes it

simpler to understand and easier to teach.

> The approaches of building gradually and peeling the onion [a metaphor Max used for parsing] are excellent techniques for teaching grammar.

The change in attitude is significant. Most of the students want to teach what they learned, and the way they learned it seems quite superior to the methods they've seen portrayed in the secondary education manuals. They seem convinced that helping their students learn about language is important and useful. If nothing else, they seem to believe, as Chomsky does, that perhaps grammar "should be taught for its own intrinsic interest and importance" (165).

Max played a key role in these transformations as he added to the collective sense of vitality we felt that "grammar lessons are a vital tool for helping . . . children become literate" (Davis 153). His emphasis on the rhetorical uses of language also gave us a sense that there is a link between grammatical analysis and reading and understanding text(s). Chomsky explained this link: "if one is going to discuss literature, including here what students write themselves, and to come to understand how it is written and why, these conceptual tools [elements of sentence structure] are indispensable" (165).

But Max was not simply involved in orchestrating transformations; he was also being transformed himself. The final transformations occurred in his classroom and in him as a teacher. As a result of this study, Max Morenberg learned quite a bit about what happened in his classroom. With the help of that knowledge, he managed to transform the nearly universal fear and loathing of grammar into something positive. Based upon a questionnaire I gave the entire class, I believe that most of the students considered the class an overall success. One of the most often cited reasons was Max's willingness to listen to the class (with my group as the conduit) and adapt his methods to help students learn. The result: nearly all of his students came to understand why the material was worth learning; and Max learned (once again) that teaching is a living process, much as the language he loves to teach.

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